



A Natural History of the Unbuilt

Haughey, D. (2020). A Natural History of the Unbuilt. *Intersections (Postgraduate Journal - Arts , Humanities , Social Sciences)*, 1(2), 56-61. <https://doi.org/10.21251/j6g8-q368>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:

Intersections (Postgraduate Journal - Arts , Humanities , Social Sciences)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 03/07/2020

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.21251/j6g8-q368>

Document Version

Author Accepted version

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact pure-support@ulster.ac.uk.

Ulster University Postgraduate Journal

Inter

Issue 2 | July 2020

{Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences}

sections

Contents

Acknowledgements	JANE MORROW, MARC OLIVIER & JAN UPRICHARD	3
Editorial		
Fragment Mouth: <i>Performance documentation</i>	DOMINIC THORPE	5
A Sustained Solitude: <i>On building community</i>	LANEY LENOX	10
Peculiar Projections of the Demiurge	JOEY O'GORMAN	14
'Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth?': <i>Considerations of sustainable approaches to collaborative practice</i>	SHEELAGH COLCLOUGH	18
Re-evaluating the Language of Pain	NIAMH MCCONAGHY	24
The Bond Between Live Art Actions and a Deeply Mediatized Culture.....	ELENI KOLLIPOULOU	30
Language Standardisation in Modern Irish: <i>Complaints sustaining discourse?</i>	JONATHAN MCGIBBON	34
In Process	PAULINE CLANCY	42
'More Acid Than Woodstock'	MILLIE LIGHT	46
Harm and Hope: <i>How we relate to our rubbish</i>	KAVITA THANKI	48
Breached	AISLINN CASSIDY	52
A Natural History of the Unbuilt	DAVID HAUGHEY	54
Spring Calling	LUCY JARVIS	60
Exploring the Queer Other through a Northern Irish Lens	PATRICK HICKEY	62
Marketing Sustainability: <i>What next?</i>	BRONAGH MAGEE	64

A Natural History of the Unbuilt

David Haughey

Supervised by: Mary McIntyre and Dougal McKenzie



If the city has become *the* definitive art form of our present, with its structures determining physical movement through positionality; by what methods might these seemingly fixed spatiotemporal terms be rewritten? This photo-essay explores how - using the material conventions of both painting and photography - fissures may be cast in the forms, discourses and increasingly unidirectional relationships imposed by the global city. Decidedly intertextual, this essay draws from the esoteric writing of Pierre Klossowski, a disputed 18th Century painting, and the magic realism of Césaire Aira in which the spectres of an unbuilt Buenos Aires have a tangible effect on the lives of its inhabitants.

Plate 1, *Untitled*, 2019.

A breath spirals above the towers of Notre Dame and - speculating upon the next body to wrest control of - describes the process of metempsychosis, in which five or seven similar breaths will arrogate a weakened body. Through this dislocation, the breaths will acquire new virtues and discharge old sins. In Pierre Klossowski's novel *The Baphomet*, transmigration is the method by which all life is perpetuated,

from insects to mammals and all between. As a mammal with a diminutive head and long snout turns in circles and speaks, the identity of the breath that moves it is not recognised by the congregation of surrounding Templar Knights. The animal is assumed to be King Frederick III of Sicily, or Frederick Hohenstaufen. In frustration at this misidentification, the giant anteater exclaims in bursts of a sepulchral voice, 'when one god proclaimed himself unique, all the other gods died of laughter!' (Klossowski, 1992: 175).

Through a slow interrogation, it is revealed the anteater is Frederic Nietzsche, or, as he is described by the Knights, Frederick the Antichrist. Relative to the boy that leads it forward on a long chain, and distinct from the architecture of the Templar's Great Hall, the form and texture of the anteater are unmistakable, but the voice is initially multiple and indefinite. An artist's identity shrouded in a potential plurality opens a similar problem for the painting in which no singular author can be discerned. The character of Inés in César Aira's *Ghosts*, describes a comparable problem - confronting a portrait artist whose spectral subjects remain wilfully diffuse. The spirits ration visibility to the smallest unit, directly corresponding to what the painter is looking at and working on. Exasperated with the incorporeal farce, the painter furiously disposes of his technical support and buys a Leica (Aira, 2013: 163).

The city in the mouth of the Río de la Plata described by Aira bears similar economic and social disparity to the Spanish settlement first demarcated in 1776 as The Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata (Klein, 1973: 441). Buenos Aires existed within this imposed delineation only until 1810, when the boundary was effectively dissolved. Highly contested, the city was won by the Criollo people gaining independence from the feuding Spanish, English and French after a two-year-long siege (Socolow, 1984: 116). During its short life, the Viceroyalty functioned as a Spanish colony and was the personal possession of King Charles III. In July of 1776, the Viceroyalty was consecrated, and a gift in the distinct form of a giant anteater made its way from Buenos Aires to the court of the Spanish King (Walker, 2011). Charles's well-documented adoration for both collecting and natural history had him immediately commission a portrait of the insectivorous Argentine mammal (de Urries y de la Colina, 2011: 242). The commission fell to the appointed court painter Anton Raphael Mengs, who established a studio in Madrid during 1762, and who, by 1776, was working on sketches for the Royal Tapestry (*Incredible Paintings*, 2012). Charles had the anteater homed at the Buen Retiro Palace, the site of the Royal Zoological Collection. This detail can be discerned from an inscribed pyramidal monolith within the portrait of the animal. This detail can be discerned from an inscribed pyramidal monolith within the



Plate 2, *Untitled*, 2020.

portrait of the animal. The inscription tells us the date of its arrival in Spain and that it had travelled from Buenos Aires, 'where more of its kind can be found' (de Urríes y de la Colina, 2011: 245).

Patri dreams about the unbuilt city of Buenos Aires. She imagines the building shared with her family... incomplete, adrift with rubble, scaffolds and precipitous openings that lead only to the concrete far below. The image summoned by what has been built, and what will be built eventually, is spanned by the amorphous unbuilt. César Aira's character – a daughter and sister in a large immigrant family that live in an unfinished apartment block in the oppressive heat of the Argentine capital – is in continual commune with dust-covered drifting phantasms that move amongst the unrendered walls of the tower. The apparition of the unbuilt city from Patri's dream is a significant feature of Aira's novel. Tellingly, the well-heeled developers and architects visiting their unfinished home appear unaware, or indifferent, to the multiplicity of spectres that occupy the mundane interactions of Patri and her family.

How the fully realised architecture of the city forms and shapes its inhabitants is discussed by Peter Osborne in reference to the photographs of Jeff Wall and the installation of Dan Graham. In his framing, the apartment block and surrounding extant structures may be considered as the manifest effect of power in the city and have become the definitive art form of our present. It is the perfect mirror of institutional and social structure, adjudicating physical movement through positionality (Osborne, 2013: 160). While the elusive phantoms tormenting a portrait painter in Aira's novel drive him to swap his easel for a tripod, the hovering apparition of the unbuilt remains inescapable. The painter's recourse to the camera lens 'only makes things worse, much worse' (Aira, 2013: 163). As the city, in all its forms and discourses, becomes global, and its contained art forms post-conceptual, the city – built and unbuilt – wavers into view as a single grand subject (Osborne, 2013: 161).

Patri dreams of how aboriginal people once shaped their landscape. They begin by presupposing a symbolic animal. This beast operates within the subconscious and is visible only through dreams and hallucinations. It exists in time outside measurable clock-time, a threshold primal state. The landscape of the waking hours is formed by events and causes that take place during the dream; as the undulations that drift across sand are attributable to the snake (Aira, 2013: 83).

Augustine of Hippo in describing his 'time of the soul' collapses the temporal dimensions of past, present and future to 'the threefold present'. This tripartite form is distributed and aligned to the personal and subjective phenomena of 'attention, memory and expectation'. Following this structure, Osborne suggests the temporality of a work of art is defined by what category of attention, memory and expectation are evoked and commanded. Osborne describes the temporality of a work as the product of idealised social and historical relations, practices and



Plate 3, *Untitled*, 2019.

processes that have as much to do with the 'deliberate production of boredom', as they do transcendence (Osborne, 2013: 175). Patri describes her dream as pure space, the kind of space arrayed in eternity and timeless. She believes this exclusion from temporality is what makes architecture an art – but is it boredom that produces the dream of the unbuilt and apparitions that haunt her waking life? During an encounter with one of the visitants, Patri asks why it is in 'such a hurry' as it drifts upward? The spectre answers, 'because of the party... the big midnight feast' (Aira, 2013: 128).

As Patri follows the ghosts upward through the empty tower, she pauses on the fifth floor. The dusk light of the city takes on mass and architectural form. Although provisional, the light that cuts through the city and the tower describes a permanence outside of time, as if it were a well thought out meteorological phenomenon (Ibid, 131). This de-temporalisation is a distinctive quality similarly produced by the digital image. In contrast to the arrested time produced by the photonic trace, the digital image deletes time altogether, a schism created by the translation of light into binary code. Boris Groys, in describing the digital image, suggests it is much like a Byzantine icon, 'a visible copy of an invisible God' (Osborne, 2013: 129). In turning the digital camera on the city; the undulation of light, the grids of shadows and layers of roofs are transmogrified to an atemporal numeric revenant.



Plate 4, *Untitled*, 2019.

After the journey from Buenos Aires, the anteater of King Charles III survived a mere seven months. The portrait was completed within this time, the artist visiting the animal at the zoological gardens and painting it from life. What we can be sure about is the diet of mince was having a detrimental effect on the anteater during this time (Walker, 2011). What remains indistinct is precisely who that artist was. Although the commission was granted to Mengs, it is believed that he was fully occupied making sketches for the Royal Tapestries. Working with him on this task was a 31 year-old Francisco Goya (Wittkower, 199:466). The painter Agustín Esteve, as well as Goya, were present at the studio of Mengs during 1776 (Soria, 1943: 243). Although attributed to Mengs for more than 200 years, recent research carried out on the painting strongly suggests that Goya was primarily involved in this commission. A document dated September 1776 records the payment for the canvas and is directed to an unnamed painter in the studio of Meng (Poundstone, 2017). The identity of the artist hovers in an undefined state of likely probabilities, multiple and indefinite.

The painting, once hanging in the offices of the curator of the Natural Science Museum of Madrid, is now on public display and in recent years has been extensively photographed and x-rayed using high-resolution digital cameras.

Courtesy of the MNCN, the digitised anteater painting is distributed across the network and each pore in the canvas, along with the formation of craquelure and the minutiae of brushwork that form the thick dark hair on the beast's back can be accessed at any given moment (Ibid). Speculating on the attributes of the digital image, Osborne suggests that as much as it is a depiction of a situation or an event, it is data that plays the role of the thing depicted – the 'original', if such a term is applicable (Osborne, 2013: 129). The duplication of the anteater painting is not a duplication of an original but the replication of a chimaera, an apparition. Compounding this problem, Osborne describes the contrast between historical representation and the subjective memory of individuals. He describes history as a construction pieced together, severed from memory and which, in this sense, takes on the absolute character of death (Ibid, 193).

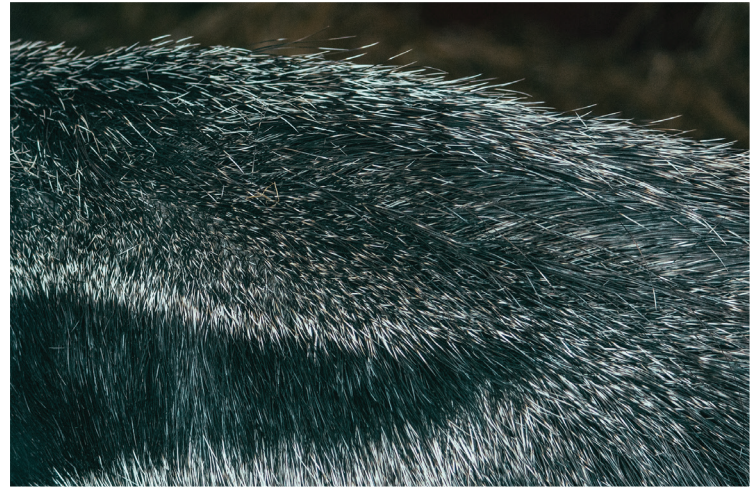


Plate 5, *Untitled*, 2019.



Plate 6, *Untitled*, 2019.

As she follows them toward the roof, Patri asks the ghosts, 'who's throwing the party?' They answer 'we are'. She wonders if she is invited; they confirm that she is. The necessary exchange becomes apparent to her (Aira, 2013: 135). As Patri thinks about the development of real, substantiated architecture, she recognises that it is dependent on accumulating enough surplus to feed and shelter the builders, the workers or the slaves that construct the building. The accumulation results in a necessary inequality. However, she recalls that there is a social mechanism for reducing all resources. Although belonging to prehistory, the potlatch involves a grand spectacle and festivity; where food, drink and all accumulated resources in a brief, tremulous ecstasy are used up and depleted. A destroying of wealth that, far from being indicative of weakness, is a demonstration of collective prosperity and with it comes equality and the regulation of excess (Ibid, 87).

In Aira's novel, it is New Year's Eve, and Patri hears her family - distant in the shell of the tower-block - celebrating. Considering the offer and allure of the party on the rooftop with the ghosts, she pauses to remain in this in-between state, 'between thought and time'. She considers the painter who must



Plate 7, *Untitled*, 2019.

delay finishing the painting because of the inherent technicalities, allowing fat layers to dry and so on – but in the interim is assailed by fresh considerations for the composition; what about another mountain or an animal (Aira, 2013: 150)?

References

Aira, C. (2013) *Ghosts*. Translated by Chris Andrews. London: Penguin.

Cassidy, B. (2011) "A Projected Cycle of Paintings by Anton Raphael Mengs for London", Source: *Notes in the History of Art* 31, no. 1, pp. 14-20.

de Urríes y de la Colina, J. J. (2011) "Un Goya exótico: La osa hormiguera de Su Majestad", *Goya* 336, pp. 242-253.

Diggs, I. (1951) "The Negro in the Viceroyalty of the Río De La Plata" *The Journal of Negro History* 36, no. 3, pp.281-301.

Incredible Paintings (2012) "Anton Raphael Mengs Biography" <http://incrediblepaintings.blogspot.com/2012/04/anton-raphael-mengs-biography.html> [Accessed 17 November 2019].

Klein, H. S. (1973) "Structure and Profitability of Royal Finance in the Viceroyalty of the Río De La Plata in 1790", *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 53, no. 3, pp. 440-69.

Klossowski, P. (1992) *The Baphomet*. Translated by Sophie Hawkes. New York, NY: Marsilio Publishers.

Osborne, P. (2013) *Anywhere Or Not at all: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso.

Poundstone, W. (2017) "Did Goya Paint this Anteater?" Accessed November 17, 2019. <http://lacmaonfire.blogspot.com/2017/10/did-goya-paint-this-anteater.html>

Socolow, S. M. (1984) "Recent Historiography of the Río De La Plata: Colonial and Early National Periods", *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 64, no. 1. pp. 105-20.

Soria, M. S. (1943) "Agustín Esteve and Goya." *The Art Bulletin* 25, no. 3, pp.239-66.

Walker, J. (2011) "Romantic Painter, Francisco de Goya Painting Found in Unexpected Location." <http://www.artesmagazine.com/?p=10611> [Accessed November 17 2019]

Wittkower, R., Connors, J., and Montagu, J (1999) *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600 to 1750*. London: Yale University Press, pp. 465-469.